

Art Papers by Amy Fung

Green House

In common understanding, the green house is a private space for cultivation. Under concentrated conditions, new seedlings are nurtured through a short period of intense dedication in order to mature into independent organisms. The green house is therefore a transitional space for incubation, where seedlings enter, but exit as hardy plants capable of laying down roots and flourishing inside the natural world.

The green house as a metaphor is quite apt for the origins of artist run spaces, especially when the green house in question is the Western Front. As the site and subject of Abbas Akhavan's recent project, *green house*, the Western Front as a non-descript green building in Vancouver becomes a self-reflexive space of inquiry.

Since taking over the Knights of Pythias Hall forty years ago, the founders and subsequent landlords and tenants of Western Front have been a cornerstone of artistic husbandry in Vancouver's cultural landscape. The Western Front has become a model of artist run culture in Canada, developing from an interdisciplinary foundation to a cross-pollinating hub for local and international artists.

For Toronto-based Akhavan's solo exhibition, a lushly forest green Bird of Paradise, *Consort* (2013), sits in the sparse gallery. Accompanying the plant are two videos, a plaster cast, a wall rubbing, and a voice. In the video, *Crew* (2013), Akhavan and Western Front exhibitions curator Jesse Birch are seen carrying their *Consort* from room to room, moving and shifting the plant through every corner and crevice, bathroom and stairwell, hallway and apartment, studio and offices, inside of the Western Front. Tracing the physical space of the artist run space, as well as showing its hidden hallways and interiors, *Consort* takes on the presence of an illuminating protagonist, driving the narrative action forward as an instigator of movement and change.

In staged tableaux, each scene firmly establishes its setting before the artist, curator, and *Consort* make their entrance. After the trio exits, the camera and viewer are also left to linger upon the deserted scene. There is a sense of completion and satisfaction before each cut, heightening the dramaturgy of all unfolding scenes. Anticipating each entry and exit, the camera and viewer become increasingly entrenched in this absurd journey. Enabling their narrative arc, the camera and viewer become active co-conspirators in the cyclical journey of the artist, curator, and protagonist as they navigate an artist run space on a perpetual loop. The annals of the Western Front are layered with institutional memories collapsing with mythologized private lives. As a muddy amalgamation of public and private space, from the cellar up to the roof, the Western Front transforms into uncharted waters as we watch this trio push and pull, often with difficulty and clumsy care, through these spaces imbued with the traces of accumulated histories. The personal and the public spaces blend into one seamless journey. Washrooms and foyers transition into private hallways and stairwells, the décor of an arts administrative office shift into the décor of an artist's apartment, and lines are blurred between what is officially archived and what remains private memory.

Entering its mid-life stride, the Western Front's programming has grown self-reflexive with an increase in examining its own identity and archive. The Western Front still remains home to two senior artists, their lives past and present remain deeply rooted in its history and consequently its future. Distinguishing the past from the present, new boundaries are forming around conceptions of public and private histories that are intricately linked to a shared space. The past becomes a living archive, and Akhavan's *green house* directly addresses the lineage and history of space as both a lived and performed routine. Running in parallel to the changing dynamics of artist run spaces, the past must be acknowledged, but the present appears on loop, moving through a cycle of what we have known and headed toward what we may still discover.